Manitoba
Culture, Heritage
and Recreation

The Origin of the Name Manitoba

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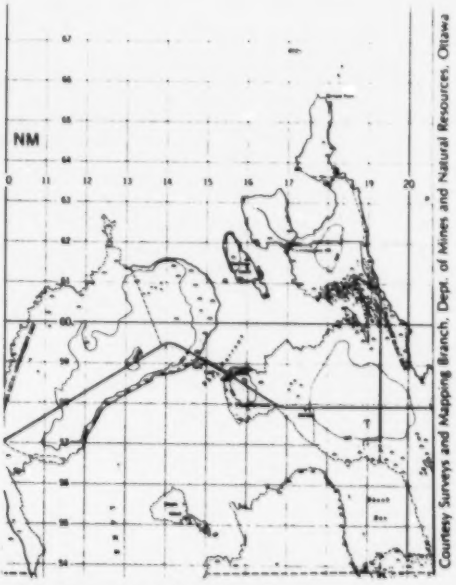
The Origin of the Name *Manitoba*

The name *Manitoba* originated in the languages of the native people who lived on the prairies and who travelled the waters of Lake Manitoba. These people, the Cree and Assiniboine Indians, introduced European explorers, traders and settlers to the region and its waterways. They also passed on to the newcomers the ancient names and poetic legends associated with the places they inhabited. Over two centuries of contact and trade between the Europeans and the Indians, resulted in a blending of their languages. From Indian name and legend, to official title of the province, the evolution of the word *Manitoba* mirrors the history of the region.

Origin and Legends

There are several accounts of the origin and meaning of the name *Manitoba*. The most common story claims the word originated with the Cree words *manitou* (Great Spirit) and *wapow* (narrows) or, in Ojibwa, *Manito-bau* or *baw*. The "strait or narrows of the Spirit" referred to the Narrows of Lake Manitoba. Here, a strong north or south wind can send the waves crashing against the limestone shingles on the shores of the lake and Manitou Island. The Indians believed the errie sound made by the wind and the waves was the voice or drumbeat of the Manitou or Great Spirit



The Narrows on Lake Manitoba

Henry Youle Hind, one of the leaders of an expedition into what is now southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan, was impressed by the mysterious noises produced by the waves on Manitou Island. One night while camping near the Narrows, Hind awoke and thought he heard the sound of chimes or distant church bells. As the wind subsided the chime-like tune was replaced by a low wailing sound. He observed that the eerie noises produced by the wind and the waves were "quite sufficient to strike awe into the minds of the . . . Indians." No doubt they also startled and awed Mr. Hind.

Hind's impressions were confirmed by J.B. Tyrrell of the Canadian Geographical Survey. In a report written in 1890-91, he noted that the water beating against the resonant limestone cliff and pounding along the pebbled shore created the sound the Indians believed to be the drum or voice of Manitou. He also wrote that a light wind produced the tinkling sound of bells described by Henry Hind.

The Narrows of Lake Manitoba was sacred to the Cree and Saulteaux, who believed Manitou Island to be inhabited by Manitou (Manito). When crossing the Narrows or camping nearby, the Indians offered gifts to the Great Spirit which were thrown into the waters of the lake. A prayer or offering was thought to bring good luck to those who passed by, and many travelled to the Narrows seeking signs of good or ill fortune.

A legend that supports the Cree origins of the name *Manitoba* shows how the area came to be associated with the magical powers of the spirit, Manitou. The tragic tale concerns two young people from an Indian village on the lake shore — Makoos (the Bear) and his fiancée Wahsiap, the daughter of the Chief.

Makoos and Wahsiap were to wed in the spring after the young men returned from the hunt. Wahsiap promised her lover that she would meet his canoe on its return. On the appointed day she set out for the rendez-vous but soon discovered she was being pursued by the Mutchi-Manitou (Evil Spirit), who wanted her for himself. Wahsiap knew that the Mutchi-Manitou could not cross water, so she leapt onto a beaver mound in the middle of the lake only to find that the evil spirit was busy blowing on the intervening water to dry it up. "Totem," the beaver, tried to help by building a row of mounds out into the lake, but Mutchi-Manitou dried up the water too quickly. Suddenly, Makoos' canoe appeared and Wahsiap watched, helpless, as the Mutchi-Manitou seized her lover's paddle, dealt him a fatal blow and threw his body into the lake. Chased by the evil spirit in Makoos' canoe, Wahsiap called on the Gitchi-Manitou (Great or Good Spirit) for help. He came to her rescue at the last moment, struck down the Mutchi-Manitou and led Wahsiap safely to shore.

Gitchi-Manitou hid the young girl among the reeds, and it is said that the sorrowful sound of the wind in the rushes is the voice of Wahsiap mourning her lost lover. According to the legend, the part of

the lake made narrow by the beaver mounds was named after the Great Spirit in memory of this tragic event.

A more recent tale of Gitchi-Manitou's adventures at the Narrows is recounted by J.J. Wilson who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company at Manitoba House, a trading post some twenty-four kilometres from the Narrows. According to the legend, a Hudson's Bay schooner on its way south from the Fairford Post was becalmed at the entrance to the straits. An old Indian among the crew appealed to Manitou for a fair wind and threw an offering into the lake. Ripples suddenly appeared on the surface of the water and a faint puff of wind soon became a steady breeze. The incident so impressed the crew that the story became a local legend.

Early Recording and Evolution

A number of nineteenth century sources agree that the name *Manitoba* is derived from the Cree (or related Ojibwa) language. In the *French-Saulteaux Dictionary* (1840), written by Father G.-A. Belcourt, the Saulteaux name is recorded and defined. In 1858 Henry Youle Hind and S.J. Dawson also recorded the word, and Father Lacombe's, *Dictionary of the Cree Language* (1874) translated *Manito-wapah* or the Saulteaux *Manito-waban* as "divine straits." Lacombe's example was followed by Bishop Taché after 1876, by J.B. Tyrrell in 1893 and by historian George Bryce in 1906.

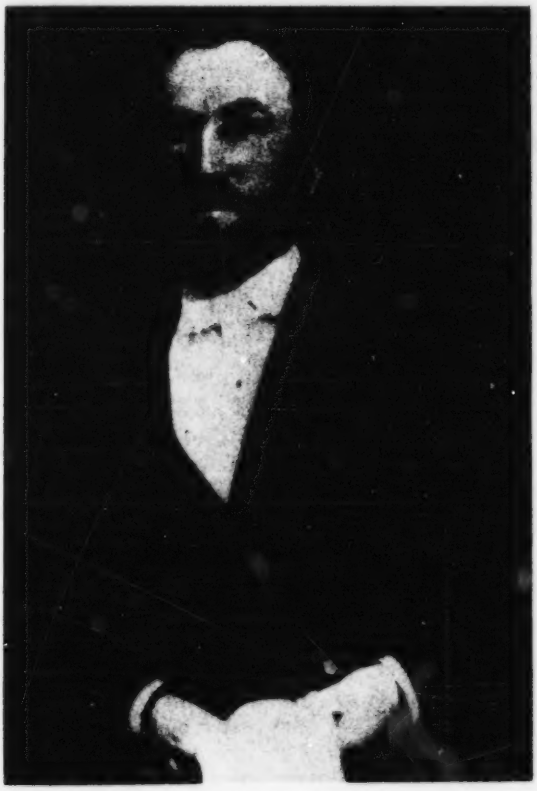
Another group maintains that the name *Manitoba* is derived from the Assiniboine-Sioux language. G. Dugas, an early historian of Western Canada, believed it originated in the Sioux words *mine* (water) and *toba* (prairies), or "Lake of the Prairies." Dugas' explanation is supported by the records of the French and English explorers who visited the area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

These early records show that the Assiniboine lived in the regions south and west of the lake, while the Cree inhabited the areas to the north and east. The Assiniboine, originally a tribe of the Sioux, broke away from the main group in the eighteenth century but kept the Siouian language. Despite the differences in their language, the Cree and Assiniboine were allies who fought together against the Dakota Sioux.

French explorer Jean-Baptiste Franquelin's map of 1688 shows present-day Lake Manitoba as *Lac des Assiniboels*, and the country surrounding it as *Pays des Assiniboels*. In 1737 Pierre La Vérendrye, another explorer, wrote that the area around Lake Manitoba was the hunting ground of the Cree and Assiniboine. In a map drawn for La Vérendrye by the chiefs of these two tribes, and in later ones drawn by the explorer himself, Lake Manitoba is called *Lac des Prairies* and the Assiniboine are shown to have inhabited the region south and west of the lake. Maps made by Thomas Jefferys (1762), and Jonathan Carver (1778) renamed Lac des Prairies, *Meadows Lake* and described the surrounding area as *Great Meadows*. They also

showed the Assiniboine in the adjacent area south of the lake.

Those who argue that the word *Manitoba* is derived from the Siouian language, claim that La Vérendrye's use of the name *Lac des Prairies* was simply a translation of the Assiniboine-Sioux words, *minetoba*. They maintain that changes in the spelling of the first word, from *mine* to *mane* or *mani* was the result of a corruption of the Assiniboine word, rather than evidence of its Cree origins. Whatever the reasons, variations in the spelling of the name were common. In 1792 Alexander MacKenzie, the explorer, called present-day Lake Manitoba, *Lake Manitaubos*. Four years later the cartographer Aaron Arrowsmith used the modern spelling, and in 1819 Peter Fidler, a trader and surveyor, used yet another variation, *Manetobaw Lake*.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Thomas Spence, Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, c. 1870s

Modern Use

Thomas Spence, a lawyer from Ontario and leader of the Canadian settlement near Portage la Prairie, was the first person to use the word *Manitoba* in reference to both the lake and the land surrounding it. By 1858 the population of the Portage community had grown to the point where it needed a municipal organization of its own. In 1868 Spence and others at the settlement formed a provisional government and announced to the British Colonial Office that the district was to be known as the *Republic of Manitobah*. The government was not recognized, but the name endured. After 1868 the word *Manitoba* was familiar even to the people of Ontario, where readers of the Toronto *Globe* learned of Spence's *Council of Manitobah*, through the letters of the poet and civil servant Charles Mair.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Riel and his Council, 1869-70

After the Red River Resistance of 1870, Thomas Spence joined Louis Riel's Métis Council. In the spring of 1870, delegates from this council were sent to Ottawa to negotiate the transfer of Red River to the Government of Canada. Riel's council at Fort Garry wrote several drafts of a List of Rights for the meeting in Ottawa. The document stated that the new province would be called *Assiniboia*, a name given

to the area by Lord Selkirk, leader of the area's first colony. Riel had misgivings about the name as it suggested a territory limited to the Red River Settlement, while the new province was to include a wider region. The name *Assiniboia* was also closely associated with the old Hudson's Bay Company regime, and some argued that a change in name would signal a fresh beginning for the new province. On 19 April 1870 Riel sent the following letter of instructions to his delegate Ritchot;

> The name of the country is already written in all hearts, that of Red River. Fancy delights in that of "Manitoba," but the situation seems to demand that of "North-West." Friends of the old government are pleased with that of Assiniboia (but) it is not generally enough liked to be kept. Choose one of the two names "Manitoba" or "North-West."

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Manitouwapaw Indian Agency

When he entered the House of Commons on 2 May 1870, Sir John A. Macdonald announced that a new province had entered confederation under the terms outlined in *The Manitoba Act*. He told the members of parliament that the province's name had been chosen for its pleasant sound and its associations with the original inhabitants of the area. Macdonald explained that the word meant "The Speaking God" — a definition probably derived from the Cree legend.

Shortly after Manitoba's entry into Confederation, the Government of Canada erected an Indian Agency on the west shore of the Narrows. It was located at the Manitoba House Settlement, in close proximity to the Ebb

and Flow and the Dog Creek Indian bands. The agency, situated at what might be called the spiritual centre of the province, was named *Manitouwapaw*.

Both the Cree and Assiniboine terms and the legends and the events associated with their use are preserved forever in the province's name. A plaque commemorating the origin of the name *Manitoba* is located on the east side of the Narrows of Lake Manitoba.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Louis Riel, c. 1870s

Suggestions for Further Reading

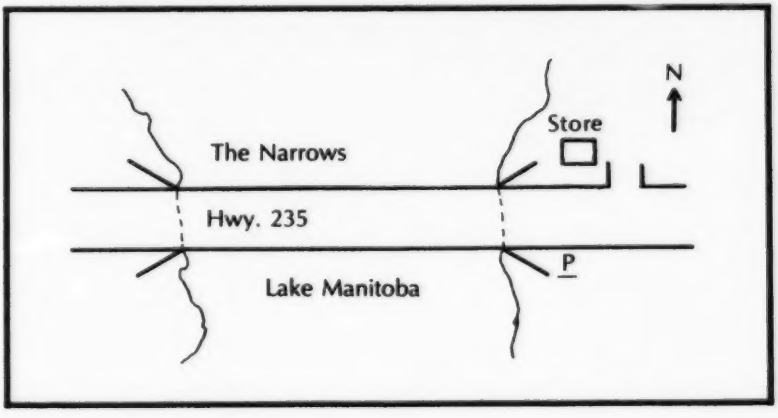
Sources that discuss both the Cree and Assiniboine origins of the word *'Manitoba'* include: William B. Hamilton, *The Macmillan Book of Place Names in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1978); G.H. Armstrong, *The Origin and Meaning of Place Names in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1930); J.B. Rudnyckyi, *Manitoba Mosaic of Place Names* (Winnipeg, 1970); H. Bowsfield, "How Manitoba Got Its Name," *Manitoba Pageant*, (April, 1956) and Frank Hall, "How Manitoba Got Its Name," *Manitoba Pageant* (V. 15, N. 2); and the Geographic Board of Canada, *Place-Names of Manitoba* (Ottawa: Department of the Interior, 1933).

Origin of the Name — Manitoba

Although Lake Manitoba was named Lac des Prairies in 1738 by La Vérendrye, the Indians knew these waters from time immemorial as the "narrows of the Great Spirit," (in Cree Manitou bau). In stormy weather waves crashing on the limestone rocks of the narrows resounded eerily, and the Indians believed the sound came from a huge drum beaten by Manito.

In 1868 Thomas Spence of Portage la Prairie attempted to create a republic outside the district of Assiniboia to be named Manitobah. His plan failed, but a year later when he joined Louis Riel's Council at Fort Garry, Spence's choice was selected as the name of the new province, and the letter H was dropped.

The Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba



This plaque located on Highway 235 near the Narrows of Lake Manitoba.